

What if you couldn't taste Christmas?

A family carries on its traditions in the face of a bittersweet disability

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By Jim Auchmutey

Christmas came early for my father this year. It came on the half shell, in a dream at Emory University Hospital. While his body struggled for life in an intensive care unit, his mind was at the DeKalb Farmers Market picking out seafood for our family's Christmas Eve dinner.



I'm not sure how this tradition started except that my father loves seafood and didn't get enough when he was growing up on a farm in North Georgia during the Depression. Every year before we opened gifts, we ate our fill of shrimp and scallops and crab cakes and oysters. Daddy is very particular about oysters. In his dream, he made a point of passing over those big Pacific oysters in favor of the little, tasty ones from the Gulf of Mexico.

We heard about my father's seafood visions after he almost died in August. He went to the emergency room with symptoms that sounded like a heart attack. It was an aneurysm; his aorta was falling apart. The surgeons repaired the damage with a synthetic section and sewed him up, but the trauma was only beginning.

We had no idea that his illness would impair his ability to swallow --- something we all take for granted --- and rob him of one of the great joys of life: eating. Food, we've come to realize as never before, is central to our gatherings, our rituals, our relationships.

Could a family still feast together when its patriarch couldn't partake? We wondered.

We might as well blame this on cigarettes.

My father is 85 and has emphysema. Like many men of his generation, he started smoking during World War II, buying a pack of Old Golds at the train station as he left home for naval officers school in New York City. He never smoked more than half a pack a day and quit by the time I was in kindergarten, but he had plenty of secondhand exposure, working for decades in an office where others lit up. As he moved into his 80s, his lung capacity declined. Laid out in the ICU, he soon developed pneumonia.

To keep him alive, doctors opened a tracheotomy in his throat and put him on a ventilator for almost three weeks. When they removed it, the muscles that control the intricate mechanics of swallowing had atrophied to the point that he was unable to eat without some of the food going down his windpipe and settling in his lungs --- a sure way to contract pneumonia again. He had dysphagia, a swallowing problem.

We were alarmed at first when the doctors told us Daddy would have to go home on a feeding tube. All we could think of was poor Terri Schiavo shriveling away in Florida. We didn't realize that hundreds of thousands of Americans survive on tubes. Many have Alzheimer's or have suffered strokes and can't feed

themselves. Others, like my father, administer their nutrition through plastic tubes inserted through the stomach wall. Nothing touches the taste buds. It's like fueling a car.

In the weeks he drifted in and out of consciousness, Daddy dreamed of food several times. He imagined he was eating Thanksgiving dinner, nibbling cookies in the hospital lobby, grabbing a sausage biscuit at Krystal. His dream about shopping for Christmas seafood was so vivid that when he came to his senses in September, he thought the holiday had come and gone.

None of this surprised his four children. We know how much our father loves to cook and eat.

When we were growing up in Decatur, our late mother, Janey Yarbrough Auchmutey, prepared most of the meals, but Daddy always enjoyed grilling out or fixing breakfast. After he retired in the 1980s, he took over most of the kitchen duties and volunteered to cook at his church and take charge of the Fourth of July barbecue at his seniors apartment complex. His appetite was fully engaged until the day he nearly died.

On the weekend before he went into the hospital, my sisters, Dawn and Susan, helped him make Brunswick stew. Auchmutey men have made stew for more than a century --- my brother, Chuck, and I have assisted the old stewmaster on several occasions --- but this was the first time for our sisters. A woman's touch clearly helped; it was one of the best batches ever.

Then, on the day before he was stricken, Daddy rose before dawn and drove 40 miles to Gardner Farm, a pick-your-own orchard south of Atlanta. His kitchen table was covered with ripening peaches when the EMTs wheeled in the gurney.

Now the table is covered with cans of a liquid nutrition formula called Jevity 1.2. Daddy needs seven cans a day to provide the 2,000 calories an adult requires to maintain weight. Each one contains 8 ounces of pale liquid that looks like the Sego diet shakes my mother used to drink.

One day, keeping my father company during a feeding, I examined the label and noticed that it touts "probiotics to help maintain and restore gut flora damaged by antibiotics or disease." I didn't see any recipes.

"I'm going to try a taste," I said.

Daddy glared at me. "If it's awful, don't tell me."

I dipped a finger into the pap.

"I don't think I can describe this. It doesn't taste like anything."

"I don't want to taste it," he said, firmly.

Tube-feeding takes a lot of time. This does not please my father. Charles Auchmutey is not a patient man.

When I was a boy, he planned our vacations by a strict timetable that dictated departures before sunrise. Once, during a lunch stop at a McDonald's in Maine, I didn't order fast enough for him and he prodded me toward the counter with some tender fatherly encouragement: "Get up there, butthole!" When I went back to the car and told my mother what her husband had said, he spent the rest of that day's drive in the doghouse.

Another time, driving back from a reunion with my mother, we stopped at a Dairy Queen to get a cone. Daddy licked his ice cream a few times, glanced at his watch and suddenly looked like he'd seen a fire engine go by. "Let's go!" he barked, ditching his cone in the trash. Mother and I started laughing and made a point of taking our sweet time.

So my father sits at his kitchen table and inserts a fat syringe into his feeding tube and fills it with "slurry," as he calls the stuff in the cans, and when it doesn't go down quickly enough, he stares at the plastic plumbing like it's a watched pot and calls it names --- although nothing as silly as he once called me.

Daddy was an auditor at General Motors for 37 years and has an auditor's obsession with numbers. The man used to count how many sweet gum balls he

picked up in our yard --- seriously. Naturally, he's calculated the time he spends feeding himself: 30 minutes a sitting, two hours a day, 14 hours a week.

He has had no choice but to practice patience.

One day he told me how he looks out the kitchen window studying the light. In the morning, he watches the sunrise play across the hood of his silver Buick LeSabre. In the late afternoon, he watches the dying light through the arms of a magnolia.

"Most people don't have time to watch the light," he said, like someone who had been reminded of something important.

For the first month after he went home, my father was visited by a speech therapist who coached him on exercises to strengthen his swallowing muscles. Her name was Pat, and we all liked her because she gave him hope that he would enjoy food again.

"What do you like to eat?" she asked one morning when I was there.

"Just about anything. I'm a pretty good cook. I'm sort of known for my Brunswick stew."

She looked puzzled. "What's Brunswick stew?"

She's really asking for it, I thought.

For several minutes, Daddy recited the rather involved recipe and asserted his conviction that authentic Brunswick stew should contain no vegetables other than tomatoes and corn.

Pat smiled. "I can see you really want to eat."

Every day, Daddy ran through the prescribed exercises. He placed his tongue between his teeth and swallowed. (Not so easy; try it.) He pretended he was downing a hard-boiled egg whole. He puckered and stuck out his tongue. He made a raspberry sound and went *eeeeeeeeee!* and *ahhhhhhhh!* The noises left him red-faced and wondering if anyone heard him and thought he was going crazy.

One October morning, Pat came by the apartment and announced that my father was ready to try soft food. I went to a nearby Publix and bought applesauce, pudding and every cream soup I could find. The cashier must have thought I was feeding a toothless family.

That day at lunch, Daddy soft-scrambled an egg and placed half a spoonful in his mouth as gingerly as a mother feeding a newborn. He closed his eyes as he tasted. I thought he was going to cry.

In the coming days, he gradually increased his food intake and decreased his tube feedings. He seemed to be progressing, but there was only one way to know whether it was all going down the right way. He had to go back to Emory for a swallowing test. They sat him down at an X-ray machine and gave him some pudding with barium in it. On the monitor, everyone could see some trickling down his windpipe. What's worse, he didn't seem to feel it happening.

No more solid food. Doctor's orders.

The next week was miserable. Some of the food Daddy had been eating had collected in his lungs, and he became congested and developed a runny nose and a deep, hacking cough. We feared he was getting pneumonia again and took him to the doctor.

His mental state was almost as bad.

"I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't cook," he said. "What else is there?"

Despite everything, Daddy said he wanted us to have Thanksgiving dinner at his place as usual. We worried that the aroma of turkey and dressing would taunt him, but he claimed he didn't really notice the smell of food anymore. He just wanted us there.

We arrived with covered dishes shortly before dinnertime. Daddy gave the prayer, blessing the food he couldn't eat. Actually, he braved a tiny bite. He placed a single cranberry and a dab of corn bread dressing on his tongue, contemplating them as reverently as if they were Communion wafers, and then waited in the living room while we ate.

We found him there after dinner in his favorite wing chair, several sheets of paper in his lap. We knew what that meant: He wanted to read us a poem.

One of my father's fondest hobbies is writing poetry. It's his way of preserving memories and finding meaning. Over the years, he has composed hundreds of verses about every aspect of his life, so we took it as a healthy sign that he had scribbled some new ones about his near-death.

He cleared his throat.

"This one is called 'The Swallow Problem.' "

He read all 24 lines. Considering what he had been through, the poem exhibited remarkable good humor. It ended with a quatrain that I think of as an octogenarian version of "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth":

*In the meantime, I want some meat, toast and jelly
Rather than Jevity that's tubed into my belly.
I hope that stuff doesn't follow me to my grave,
'Cause it's steak, chops and chicken that I crave.*

A month later, he's still craving. He isn't ready to try solid food again. For now, all he has is the hope and the memory. In a dream he had the other night, he's a boy again, helping his father with the livestock on a cold winter morning. They feed the mules, the cows, the hogs, the goat, and then they go back into the house where his mother has made a big breakfast. He reaches for a biscuit --- and wakes up.

Before my father left rehab, a nurse joked that when he gets hungry, he ought to dump some gravy down his feeding tube. We thought about it at Thanksgiving but decided that giblet gravy might clog the line.

Instead, Daddy had a nightcap, pouring some white wine into his tube. He'll probably do it again tonight, on Christmas Eve. I hope it leads to sweet dreams, not of sugarplums, but of oysters --- the tasty, little ones from the Gulf.

Charles Auchmutey died in the spring of 2007, four and a half months after this article appeared. He never ate solid food again. His family still gathers on Christmas Eve and feasts on seafood.